

Senate Bill 151
January 29, 2013
Presented by Ken McDonald
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Ken McDonald, Wildlife Division Administrator of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 151.

FWP opposes this bill because it undoes a very extensive, very public elk management process by Putting into statute elk permit numbers. This issue and this level of management is one that has evolved over the past five years, through an ongoing and extensive public process that includes public review and input every two years during the biennial season setting process. The specificity for this level of management is best addressed by the FWP Commission

There are really two different resources being considered – the bull elk resource, and the overall elk population. Some say that the Department shouldn't limit opportunity in these units when the resource is over objective. While the overall elk population may be over objective in some units, the bull elk resource is highly coveted, and is not overabundant or unlimited. Very clearly, this bill is about bull elk permits, and it will do nothing to reduce the population in the hunting districts affected by this bill, since populations are most effectively managed by antlerless harvest. Fully 80% of elk harvested with these permits are bulls. Conversely, the antlerless harvest from these permits accounts for only 5% of total antlerless harvest in these districts. Given these harvest characteristics, removing these permits will not reduce elk numbers where they are over objective.

In the Missouri River Breaks hunting districts, there are many trophy-class bull elk. These bulls are the product of very limited numbers of rifle season permits that are among the most sought-after elk permits with some of the longest drawing odds. Until the 2008 season archers could avoid these long drawing odds of less than 10% and pursue these same trophy bulls in unlimited fashion. While archery hunter success is less than rifle hunter success, the overall number of bull elk taken by archers was beginning to exceed rifle harvest of bulls because of the sheer number of archery hunters. This resulted in equity issues between archery and rifle hunters, overcrowding complaints, undesirable redistribution of elk, and corresponding impacts to management effectiveness.

To address these issues before they became greater and more difficult to manage, limited archery permits in these units began with the 2008 season. To be consistent, and to head off recognized and potential issues elsewhere, archery bull permits were implemented in any hunting district already having limited rifle permits. Reflecting the different hunter success, archery permit levels are significantly higher than rifle permits and still offer considerably better drawing odds of 50% or better.

The process resulting in these changes was very open and broad. The 2008 public process included two lengthy FWP Commission hearings open to public comment, a 43-day public comment period and 44 different season-setting meetings across the state. In total, public input included over 1,800 written comments, significant verbal testimony at the 2 FWP Commission hearings and attendance by approximately 2,000 people at meetings across the state. Since then, based on additional public input, the FWP Commission has adjusted the permit numbers, drawing choices, grouped hunting districts and incorporated an annual review. Two different citizen working groups have been assembled. While neither was able to arrive at full consensus and some of their products were not widely endorsed by the reviewing public, several of their recommendations have been incorporated.

There have been questions as to why the Department would limit the number of permits in hunting districts that are over objective. Many of these units were over objective in 2007 in spite of—if not because of—the previous structure of unlimited or no permits. Recognizing many populations have continued to grow, seasons have appropriately continued to evolve. Since 2008 there have been additional season refinements made during the 2010 and 2012 season setting efforts. The latest refinements include annual review of harvest relative to population status and objective in conjunction with an additional 1,000 antlerless elk B licenses valid in both the archery and rifle seasons. In most of these hunting districts any archer has maintained the opportunity to harvest an antlerless elk without needing a special permit. In many districts this antlerless opportunity extends into the rifle season as well.

Older-aged bulls are intentionally maintained by restricting harvest. The implementation of limited bull elk archery permits, while contentious, was and is the product of significant, established and ongoing public process addressing increased participation in archery hunting, quality hunting opportunities, effective management of big game populations on private and public lands and allocation between competing user groups. Randomly drawn permits currently in place fairly address these allocation issues, while the permit numbers and other season structures can and have been adjusted in response to public inputs. SB 151 would undo lengthy process and ongoing efforts, and would put in statute the same faulty structure that initiated this series of changes.

For these reasons, FWP respectfully requests a Do Not Pass on SB 151.